

Quenched

March 12, 2023

Thirst

Sometimes, worship comes together more by fortune than design. Don't get me wrong, the rest of the staff and I work hard to create services that are meaningful, relevant, and inspiring for you. But sometimes, the way things come together are more "happy accident" than planned.

Take last week: I had been connecting with several members over the course of the week about difficult family situations, and our music staff and I had already chosen "God Made From One Blood" as our opening hymn, a song that invites us to both give prayerful thanks for our families while at the same time it acknowledges the pain and brokenness that is all too often part of our experience of family. Or today, and the fact that Stephanie and Amanda and I planned Lucca's baptism months ago, without looking at the fact that the Gospel assigned for today is about the waters of grace.

To be fair, my reflection on the grace-filled waters of baptism today will not resonate with Lucca for some time, but I do hope that the flip side is true – that my reflection will help you adults in the room to taste a glimpse as to how your baptism is still relevant in your lives. My colleague Christina Villa used to be on the staff of the national United Church of Christ offices, and now works with Union member Brian Bodager at the Pension Boards of the UCC.

Years ago, she wrote a piece that connects us so well to today's Gospel. She wrote:

After gym class when I was in elementary school,
we would all line up at the drinking fountain,
sweaty and dying of thirst,
and wait our turn for a drink of water.

I remember my 5th-grade teacher would stand next to the fountain
and turn the handle briefly for each kid,
so we only got as much water as she decided we needed.
We all left the water fountain still thirsty.

When you're really thirsty, you can't think about anything else.
Thirsts of the spirit are in a class apart from ordinary passing hunger.

People get parched, like the ground in a drought.
Nothing will grow in them.
Loneliness and every kind of grief are droughts for the spirit.
People can become parched for love,
for company or a kind word, even a smile.

In the Bible, blessings are poured like water onto people
because our spirits' need to be blessed
is as urgent as the body's need for water.
"For I will pour water on the thirsty land," says God.

Try being more like God (and less like my 5th-grade teacher).
Just assume that everyone you encounter is thirsty, somehow or other.
Pour water on the dry ground to revive and bless someone's spirit today.

Isn't that a powerful image, the teacher allowing each kid just enough water to wet their mouths, but not enough to quench their thirst? So, too, it is with so much religion, indeed so much else that we seek to soothe our weary souls. So often in our culture and our systems, we are given just enough, just a taste, but the Bible is gushing with abundant water – the Israelites getting water from the rock in Exodus, God in Amos saying that the waters of grace will roll down like a mighty stream, our Gospel today in which Jesus says that he will be the source of such abundant water that we will never be thirsty again, all of which, of course, ties us to our baptisms, and the concept that in baptism we are perpetually united to its cycle of grace and forgiveness.

In baptism, God turns on a tap which quenches our thirst, soothes our pain, cleanses the messes we get ourselves into, drowns our guilt and shame, and leaves that tap running. It's on forever.

Finding Ourselves in the Gospel

Brett Younger, the Senior Pastor of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn says that the author of the Gospel of John includes the story of the woman at the well because we have a lot in common with her. We're all thirsty:

We are not what we should be and not what we wish we were. We did something years ago that we have never been able to forget. We hurt someone in an inexcusable way. We have scars that are hard to miss and scars so deep we think we are the only ones who know about them. We are not who people think we are. When Jesus first speaks to the woman, she assumes he does not know who she is, but through their conversation, we come to see that Jesus knows her very well and loves her just the same. God knows who we are, knows all about our dark corners, and loves us anyway. It's hard for us to believe, but because of God's grace, our secrets lose their power over us. We are free to live with joy.

(Brett Younger)

This is why our baptisms are relevant to us as adults today. Because, in God's grace, our secrets lose their power over us, and we are free to live with joy.

Younger goes on:

In Alice Walker's novel, "The Color Purple," Celie and Shug have a long talk about God. Celie has been abused by life. For a long time, she tried to be what she was taught was a good Christian, but now she has given up and decided that God is dead. She describes her gifts from God as "a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again." Shug tries to help Celie believe in God again, and Celie finds this astonishing since Shug has never been a churchgoer and has always been what Celie thinks of as a big sinner. Shug asks Celie to describe the God that she doesn't believe in, "He big and old and tall and greybearded and white." Shug replies: "If you wait to find God in the

white folks' church that's the one who is bound to show up. When I found out God was white, and a man, I lost interest.”

Shug is the Samaritan woman. She's thirsty, and prejudiced people keep telling her that God doesn't care for her. Giving her a sip of water, telling her about a God of love, but never actually letting her drink deeply. Shug tells Celie, “God love everything you love and a mess of stuff you don't...Praise God by liking what you like...People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see (God) always trying to please us back...Once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please God.”

The Samaritan woman forgets her water jar and leaves it at the well. We have heavy jars that we lug, day after day in the hot sun, hoping to find a few drops of water in the well. Our jars are the “should haves,” “ought tos,” and “never wills” of our lives. They are the times we let the people we love down, the times we let ourselves down, and the times we let God down. They are the parts we keep hidden—our insecurities, our apathy, and our fears. The God who knows us best says: “All of your thirsts, even the secret parts you do not think anyone knows about, are quenched in my living water, are made whole in my grace. No matter what you have done or will do, you are invited to know and love me, and to be known and loved by me.”

(Brett Younger)

Friends, the waters of God's grace are here for anyone who needs a drink. And, unlike Christina Villa's 5th grade teacher who meted out just a sip at the bubbler, the waters of Christ's love and mercy and healing and grace are deeper than Lake Superior and more vast than the sea. So submerge yourself. Guzzle the grace. Splash one another. And in doing so, allow yourself to be soothed, healed, quenched, beloved.

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